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Recommended Citation

McWhorter, Ladelle. "Practicing Practicing." In *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, edited by Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, 143-162. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

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Practicing Practicing

Ladelle McWhorter

"There is something ludicrous in philosophical discourse," Michel Foucault writes, "when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it . . ." (Foucault 1985, 9). In our age of moral relativism and multiculturalism, it is easy to hear in this sentence a simple condemnation of intellectuals who pose as authorities on questions of belief, and it is all too easy to agree; yes, of course, we ought not tell other people what to think. But given the issues, directions, and investments of Foucault's work, especially in *The Use of Pleasure* where this passage is to be found, I think this sort of soft relativistic reading of him is a great oversimplification, if not a total error. As I see it, Foucault's statement is not so much a disparagement of authority and authoritative pronouncement as it is a gesture toward a philosophical reorientation; Foucault is developing an alternative conception of what philosophical work might be. Within this reorienting movement, authority ceases to be of very much concern, not because one comes to the realization that there are no authorities (there may well be) but because one ceases to be primarily concerned with *pronouncement*; that is, the formulation of true propositions is no longer one's primary philosophical goal. And once one ceases to focus one's energy on establishing the truth of propositions, one is no longer likely to spend much time dictating to others which propositions they should hold true.

In his last years Foucault became very interested in the Hellenistic period, a time when philosophy was less concerned with doctrine and more concerned with developing, as Pierre Hadot has put it, "a way of life." Hadot, whose work was extremely important to Foucault,¹ offers Stoicism as an example of this widespread Hellenistic view: "The Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly that philosophy, for them, was an 'exercise.' In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and a determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the

self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better" (Hadot 1995, 82–83).² To illustrate this point, Hadot cites Seneca ("Philosophy teaches us how to act, not how to talk"), Epictetus ("spiritual progress does not consist in learning to explain Chrysippus better, but in transforming one's own freedom"; "the subject-matter of the art of living [i.e., philosophy] is the life of every individual"), and Plutarch ("since philosophy is the art of living, it should not be kept apart from any pastime") (1995, 110; notes 9, 10, and 11). It is from these texts and others from the Hellenistic period that Foucault takes his notion that lives can be works of art and that philosophical practice can be part of an *ethos*, a way of living.

Like Foucault, although without benefit of Hadot's work until recently, I have come increasingly over the years to view and to experience philosophy as a kind of self-forming activity. The point of philosophical endeavor is not to establish a body of cosmological or moral propositions that we might believe in or adhere to and that we might reasonably expect others to believe in or adhere to as well. Philosophy is not pursuit of truth. Philosophy is pursuit of wisdom. Truth, as Agent Mulder often claims, may well be out there, awaiting us like an as yet unidentified object just over the horizon. But wisdom's residence is never out *there*; if wisdom comes into view at all, its site of emergence will be *here*—with, through, and as the unfolding of my life, or your life, or the life of someone else. Whereas truth may occur as the timeless relationship between a proposition and a state of affairs, wisdom occurs as the temporal unfolding of human thought in practice. This is what Hellenistic philosophers such as the Stoics and Epicureans and Cynics seem to have believed. This is what I think Foucault came to believe. At any rate, it is what *I* believe.

But, if I am to be a philosopher, this presents me with a problem. The principal activity of philosophers in our time is the production of essays, like the one I am writing now. And essays—as fostered, encouraged, or even demanded by academic institutions—are usually construed as tools of transmission, a kind of intellectual transportation; essays are the vehicles in which our truths ride from one mind to another. Thus, philosophical practice in the present day is reduced to truth-acquisition followed by report-writing. The process by which one acquires the truths to be inserted into the vehicle is not at issue (unless one is accused of plagiarism); the point is to get into possession of some truths and to construct a vehicle adequate to bear them to their destination, "the audience." But what does any of that have to do with cultivating oneself as a site for the emergence of wisdom?

I'm not terribly sure. So the temptation, which I'm certain is not peculiar to me, is to set that question aside and just get on with the business of constructing intellectual vehicles for the small stock of ideas that one has

already managed to amass,³ or to undertake a frantic search for a new idea, a new truth that can be manufactured, packaged, and launched into the world by the editor's deadline, without regard to what effect that frantic process might have on the writer. It is very easy to succumb to this temptation without even realizing it, especially when living at the hectic pace that most of us maintain during the academic year. I have to admit that it is exactly what I did when I started working on this essay.

From the beginning of the project, I knew what I wanted to write about: the differences between feminist practices of woman-affirmation and Foucauldian care of the self, which might be construed as practices of self-affirmation. I wanted to say that even for someone who is a woman and comfortably identifies that way, woman-affirming practices may be positively antithetical to caring for one's self. (This is because feminist practices of woman-affirmation often make assumptions about the nature of selfhood that I believe are both mistaken and dangerous, especially for people who are oppressed. Foucault's conception of selfhood and descriptions of self-cultivating practices are less likely to support patterns of oppression that currently exist. But more about this later.) I also had what I thought were some pretty good ideas about how to illustrate those differences. Nevertheless, I seemed unable to settle into a consistent tone or style of writing, no matter how hard I worked at it. The essay just never sounded right to my ear.

At first it seemed that my problem was that I didn't know who I was writing for. Who was my audience for this explanatory exercise? Was it feminists interested in but not knowledgeable about Foucault, feminists hostile to Foucault, feminists already convinced by Foucault, nonfeminist Foucauldians? Who? How I styled the essay depended on which of these groups I wanted my message to reach. After all, essays are means of transmission. How I built my verbal vehicle depended on which audience I wanted my little truth transported to. But after weeks of struggle over the question of audience identity, I finally recognized that my problem was not in fact the lack of a clear sense of audience to which to present my thesis; it was the pernicious presence of a need to designate an audience for what supposedly was a philosophical exercise of *self-transformation*. I was focused on others when I should have been focused on myself. Furthermore, I had to ask myself, why did I want to explore the differences between feminist woman-affirming practices and Foucauldian care of the self? So that I could tell those feminists what they were doing wrong? So that I could enlighten some Foucault scholars about feminist practice? So that I could presume to tell those other people what to think? What would be the value in that, in relation to wisdom, even if I were in possession of some extraordinary truth? I began to worry that I didn't

have a message after all. No message, no audience. Ultimately that seemed to equal no essay.

But, I realized, what I did have was a very real (in fact a fast-growing) concern. Something was gnawing at me. And that was a place to start. For the sake of the essay, if for no other reason, I needed to pay close attention to the nature and context of my own concern; I needed to take care of my self.

So I started all over again. The important thing to focus on, I decided, was the tension I feel between feminist practices of woman-affirmation and practices associated with a Foucauldian conception of care of the self. I'm attracted to practices of woman-affirmation, especially to those that involve revaluation of natural cycles, carnality, and the earth. Something important offers itself in those movements, and yet I feel that they endanger me in ways that Foucault's work warns me about and makes me sensitive to. I decided that if I paid attention to the uneasiness I feel when I try to situate myself in relation to both of these discursive practices simultaneously (which was the theme of the anthology, anyway, right?), maybe something unforeseen would happen. Who knows? Maybe I could even find a way to practice philosophy while still fulfilling the requirements of my academic job. Imagine that! So I turned my attention to feminist practices that have spoken most meaningfully to me over the last twenty-five years, namely, those that involve how I live with, through, and as my body.

Feminists nowadays write a lot about "the body," thereby acknowledging the importance of corporeal issues in our intellectual pursuits, but we don't often acknowledge straightforwardly how difficult it was to live life as a female body before our encounters with early radical feminist reinterpretations of female bodily existence. Simone de Beauvoir's inventory of masculine supremacist invective against female bodies in *The Second Sex* accurately portrays what many of us lived with—ubiquitous images of our bodies (which *were already* ourselves) as obtrusive, ugly, filthy, stinking, irrational, and inherently diseased. Beauvoir herself suggests that this construction of the female body is historical and therefore optional. The radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s took her suggestion very seriously and began to critique the construct of femininity that produced and reinforced such degraded bodily existences. Alice Embree's analysis of Madison Avenue strategies to create and sustain feminine consumers and Naomi Weisstein's critique of contemporary psychological theories, both of which appeared in the 1970 publication *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, are cases in point, and they are only two of scores of articles that appeared around the same time.⁴ Women believed we were stinking and filthy because profit-makers told us so through every medium available. We believed we were irrational and incompetent because professionals told us through every so-

cial institution in existence. Feminists told and *showed* us, however, that these messages were motivated politically and economically. They were not truths to be accepted despite humiliation and pain; they were propaganda to be resisted and opposed.

Feminist exposés and reinterpretations made it possible to imagine a culture in which female bodies would be celebrated and valued rather than denigrated, because they made it possible to believe that the denigration of *our* female bodies in *this* culture was a political rather than a biological fact, a matter of power arrangements rather than nature. As I read the words of feminist anthropologists, historians, poets, cultural critics, theologians, and others, I began to look at my body differently, to see potentials not seen before, and to feel different inside (and as) my skin. The practice of reading, discussing what I read with friends, and seeking out more feminist writings to read, was positively life-transforming for me and for many other women my age and older. It helped me realize that the body my culture had handed me was not the only one I might have and that with time and effort my corporeal existence could be otherwise, even radically otherwise.

This move toward the otherwise was no mere intellectual leap, no simple rational rejection of a false ideology soon replaced by the truth. This transformation was not something that took place just inside my head. Feminist writing that critiqued and reinterpreted bodily existence invited me and summoned me to conduct myself, as a bodily being, differently. As I saw new conceptual possibilities, I enacted new behavioral possibilities and then saw new conceptual possibilities in turn. Not just my thinking, but my whole comportmental ensemble changed.

And it didn't stop there. Through the 1980s feminists made connections between the denigration of female bodies that is still rife in our culture and the misuse and abuse of other beings. It became clear that our culture's disgust with and exploitation of female bodies is just one part of a much larger picture that includes refusal of human mortality and denial of our dependence upon nature. Along with writers such as Susan Griffin, Vandana Shiva, Ynestra King, and Starhawk, I too found that as my ways of thinking about and of *being* a female body began to shift away from the dualistic, quasi-Cartesian, masculine supremacist ways I had thought and lived before, I needed and wanted to develop and engage in new practices regarding aging, mortality, and ecological cycles. I couldn't just be a feminist. I had to be something like an eco-feminist. And this shift involved much more than just adoption of a new set of doctrines; it involved—it primarily consisted of—the practice of a new set of actions. I didn't just read Starhawk; I gardened and composted and contributed money to environmental lobby groups and educated myself about environmental issues and policies and

drove a pick-up route for a recycling co-op. And I saw these things as directly and intimately related to my feminist practices. Once again, I was rethinking bodily existence—*with and through my body*.

Maybe that was how I started rethinking philosophy as a way of life. I'm not sure, but it was during that same period of time that I came to be consciously open to the import of Plutarch's words: "since philosophy is the art of living, it should not be kept apart from any pastime." It was about this time in my life that I became deeply aware of the need to think of philosophy not as mere intellectual exercise, as a mind/body dualist might have it, but as physical, material practice. With my changing, materially, ecologically thoughtful comportment, I was becoming a living critique of (albeit still a site of ongoing struggle with) Western metaphysical dualism. If one of the major philosophical issues of the twentieth century was the attempt to dismantle and move beyond metaphysics in general and dualism in particular, then I was twentieth-century Western philosophy incarnate. I think many of us feminists, particularly eco-feminists, were.

Throughout that long period in my life, then, feminist practices were very important for me. They focused and helped me focus on overcoming traditional—crippling—conceptions of female bodies and restructuring my bodily comportment; in doing so they helped me connect myself in new and positive ways with the other living beings and systems on our living planet; and all of this involved extensive engagement with other feminists in bodily practices such that I could not forget that even the seemingly most otherworldly, most abstract of intellectual pursuits is truly corporeal, material, and dependent upon the organic interconnections that make up our earth. Over the past twenty years, feminist practices have made me who I am; they have given me my self. And it is a much better, healthier, more beautiful self than it would have been had feminism never come to exist. Yet I am deeply suspicious of many feminist woman-affirming practices, even while I am so attracted (and so indebted) to them. My suspicions are painful to me; I want to avoid them. But as a philosopher, I find I just can't.

The effort to rid ourselves of the oppressive bodily comportments and self-images that patriarchal society constructed for us was in many respects a necessarily creative enterprise. In the process of rejecting that femininity, we had to imagine and build new ways to act, to see ourselves, and to relate to others and the world around us. We had to become other than what we had been; we had to invent ourselves. Had we just done that—had we just opened ourselves to possibility and experimentation—who knows what might have happened? What would women have become if we had simply dismantled 1960s-style femininity and female sex roles and embraced the unknown? But we didn't. Historian Alice Echols says that by

1975—and in some groups such as Boston's Cell 16 as early as 1970—radical feminism was in decline and was being replaced on the narrowly defined political front by liberal feminism and on every other front by cultural feminism.⁵ For a variety of reasons, some of the same feminists who had been trying to destroy static images of femaleness began trying to construct an alternative image—an image they claimed did what the patriarchal images had failed to do: It captured the truth of womanhood.

Since that door began to open just before 1970—that door that was an exit from a patriarchally constructed female essence—feminists have agonized over the question of the truth of womanhood. Radical feminism's own analyses seemed to point to an absence of such a truth outside patriarchy (as well as, of course, an absence of actual *truth* within it). But if absence there were, then to step through that door would be to step out of womanhood altogether and, hence, to run the risk of scattering, of becoming so other that unity would be impossible and newfound feminist solidarity and support would be jeopardized and quite possibly lost. If feminism as an organized movement was to continue to exist, the door could not be merely an exit. It had to be a portal to something real and substantial enough to hold together, to hold *us* together, and to give us something to affirm.

This concern about the loss of unity and the belief it gave rise to—that there is a nonpatriarchal truth of womanhood—was subterranean in some of the work of the early cultural feminist and eco-feminist movements. And so it was possible, especially for those of us who still desperately needed the communities and practices that would help us resist the ever-evolving patriarchal images of femaleness that assailed and pervaded us, to ignore the danger that such a belief entails. We needed a community and a language to support our own creative ventures, so we were willing to overlook the denial of creativity that was taking the form of cries of discovery.

But it *was* a denial of creativity. As an illustration, consider the contributions of Judy Grahn. Like all good feminist work, Grahn's scholarly activity was not merely cognitive; it was a corporeal practice intended to change her own ways of living as a female body, and was offered to her readers as an aid in our own woman-affirming practices. In "From Sacred Blood to the Curse and Beyond," Grahn explores the importance of menstruation for the prehistory of human society, a task she undertakes in part as a way to come to terms with her own femaleness and female bodily functions. Since there is hardly any aspect of female embodiment that is more stigmatized in our culture than menstruation, as Beauvoir among others points out (Beauvoir 1989, especially 149–50), Grahn's choice of subject matter is extremely apt. Male commentators on the subject have typically

found it to be filthy and disgusting. In the not-so-distant past, women's descriptions were filled with comments resembling those typical masculine judgments. Most girls—myself included—were taught to be ashamed of the function, to view it as compromising their standing as rational creatures and competent citizens, and to hide it at least from males if not from everyone.⁶ No more than a generation or two ago, women regularly referred to it as “the curse.” But far from being a painful curse, Grahn argues, menstruation was originally the very wellspring of culture. It was because of menstruation that human beings “saw and learned to capture the concept of time” (Grahn 1982, 268). Further, “[b]y carving the moon cycles onto bone, by putting counting sticks into a basket, by tying knots in string, and by stringing beads in a particular manner to account for their own periods and the moon’s, women created counting—and accounting” (Grahn 1982, 268). She continues: “Without menstruation and the sciences of measurement women developed from watching first the moon and then the stars, there would be no clocks or watches, no astronomers, no mathematicians or physicists, no astronauts, none of the architecture and engineering which have been born from exact measurement and proportion. We could build a nest, like a bird, but not a pyramid, not a square or rectangle or round or any other regular geometric shape. Geometry was a gift of menstruation” (Grahn 1982, 269). Indeed, Grahn implies, without this now degraded and hidden mammalian function, we would hardly be human at all.

The thrust of Grahn’s essay is not just that we need to find new ways to live and to value ourselves but that we need to recover the lost value of menstruation as a way of recovering the true value of womanhood. By doing that, we will discover ways to live menstruation (and our lives as women) differently. Grahn relates in some detail the new knowledge of her own body that she acquired and the practices that she engaged in after she began to learn about the ancient meaning and importance of menstruation. The process of learning about that prehistorical world where women’s bodies were valued was life-transforming for her, as for other women she knows, and she hopes it will be life-transforming for her readers. She offers her scholarship as material for woman-affirming educational practices and suggests that women follow her lead in developing feminist rituals that celebrate womanhood by celebrating menstruation.

Kay Turner, who has studied feminist rituals (including rites of passage like the ones Grahn mentions), maintains, “Feminist ritual offers an imagistic revitalization for women and participation in the concrete, bodily expressive creation of new images of the feminine . . .” (Turner 1982, 220). Not just menstruation rituals but also cleansing rituals, equinox rituals, dream-sharing rituals, bonding rituals, and so on are important means, Turner ar-

gues, of "connect[ing] the individual with the group—dramatically, indissolubly" (Turner 1982, 226). Rituals are practices that produce a sense of group identity and cohesiveness. But they are just as important for the health of individuals as they are for the health of the groups to which those individuals belong. Through ritual, according to Turner, "A lost self is recovered, nurtured and allowed to emerge fully named" (Turner 1982, 231).

Grahn and Turner both assume that part of what happens in feminist consciousness-raising, feminist scholarship, and feminist ritual—in all practices that are woman-affirming—is that women find their true identities, their true selves. Woman-affirmation involves not so much self-creation or self-formation as the recovery of a self that is already formed. This recovery, or uncovering, can happen, they maintain, because through feminist activity women open spaces outside of patriarchal power, beyond the reach of the networks of power that define femaleness as inferior to maleness and impose hardship and shame upon women. This is why Turner asserts that feminist ritual in particular is a form of radical politics (Turner 1982, 222).

Grahn and Turner and their compatriots such as Kathleen Barry and Mary Daly might be viewed as extreme essentialists quite unlike a good many of their contemporaries and certainly unlike the anti-essentialist postmodern feminists of the turn of this century.⁷ But I don't think we can dismiss them that easily. The turn away from radical creativity and toward discovery that we see full scale in their work haunts all of feminism, I think, including postmodern theory. And I fear it will continue to haunt us as long as feminists yearn to affirm ourselves as an "us," as members of an identifiable class of people called "women."

Yet what else are we to do? What is feminism about if it is not about people identifiable as women? What is it, if it is not a way of discovering commonalities and gathering women together to achieve certain goals? If we embrace the unknown and experiment with creating forms of existence beyond the category of womanhood, in what sense is what we are doing "feminism" anymore?

At this point I become extremely uneasy. What initially attracted me to feminism was its emphasis on moving beyond the present and the past—including any kind of mythical past. The old Women's Liberation Movement seemed to me to be about changing rules, loosening restrictions, opening doors, challenging traditions, and experimenting with personal styles and interpersonal relationships. It was a vigorous push outward, a breaking of bonds, a headlong rush out of confinement and into the world. It was not an inward-turning thing. It was leonine—ferociously destructive—and childlike—playful and creative. But of course, at the same time, it was also a product of its culture, a culture that resists with all its might

any turn away from the stasis of traditional identity, any move into the unknown. Somehow that culturally pervasive resistance overcame iconoclastic feminist momentum. Feminism gradually began to have an identifiable center: Woman—woman the victim of oppression, woman the subject and object of efforts to emancipate, woman the site of downtrodden virtue and righteous social change. Feminism came to be about recognizing that Woman and nurturing her as she recovered herself and took her destined place as the catalyst for a general, culturewide moral revolution. What had perhaps started out as a courageous journey into the unknown somehow got recast as a kind of enlightened return to origins. What I fear is that within feminism, such a turn is in some sense inevitable.

I sincerely hope not, for I feel endangered in the movement of that return. In spite of all I may have gained through woman-affirming practices, I fear that in this re-centering movement I am being pulled back toward a way of thinking and living that I wanted to interrupt and re-form, back into a way of experiencing selfhood (and the world) that places stability over becoming and change, into a way of thinking that places knowledge over openness toward otherness and difference, toward that which eludes categorization. And this feeling doesn't dissipate completely when I read or work with anti-essentialist feminists. Underneath or alongside their ubiquitous critiques of essentialism I still detect a hint of the assumption that, despite it all and whatever happens, we are still women, and we can rest assured that nothing in feminism will compromise *that*.

Through personal experience and through my study of Foucault's work, I am deeply aware of how dis-affirming such assumptions and insistences ultimately are for the kind of self that I am. And that brings me to Foucault and self- (as opposed to woman-) affirming practices.

It has often been asserted that Foucault's early and middle works embody attempts to analyze political and social forces in the absence of subjectivity, which would seem to mean that any kind of self-affirmative gesture is impossible for Foucault. The first part of that assertion is true; Foucault did in fact say once in an interview that he wanted to develop a mode of analysis that did not rely upon a subject outside of history.⁸ But he never maintained that there is no such thing, at any given point in history, as human subjectivity of one sort or another. In Foucault's view, whether there is or is not some form of subjectivity at a given place and time is an empirical matter. In the periods Foucault studied, there were various kinds of subjectivity. In fact, it is these variations, together with the possibility of variation itself, that Foucault is most concerned with through much of his career.⁹ Foucault merely refuses to assume that subjectivity, selfhood, is foundational or ahistorical. Selves are historical creations, con-

stituted within networks of power/knowledge relations; different networks of power/knowledge yield different types of self. Self-affirmation, then, is perfectly possible, but what sorts of practices are self-affirming depends upon what type of self one is.

Foucault gives the name "normalization" to the power/knowledge network that he believes is most prevalent in our society today. The selves that emerge within that network, various though they may be, are all normalized selves. This does not mean that all selves are normal—far from it!—or that all selves not deemed normal are constantly being subjected to treatments to make them normal. In the most general terms, what it does mean is, simply, that who one is can be fully characterized (insofar as it can be characterized at all) in terms of norms and deviations from norms. In other words, in every aspect of my being—physical, intellectual, moral, you name it—I am a being in process, proceeding through stages of existence and functions of daily life at a rate and along a vector that can be measured and plotted against a norm. My individuality, insofar as it can be an object of knowledge (mine or others'), just amounts to the totality of my deviations from established norms.

Normalization is what Foucault at an early stage in his career might have called a grid of intelligibility. It is a conceptual framework through which we view ourselves and others (both human others and nonhuman beings such as animals, plants, ecosystems, and human cultures). Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Foucault tells us, we Westerners have learned to see all the world in terms of the category of development; all things develop, and their more or less natural patterns and forces of development can be studied, normed, and to a great extent harnessed and directed by scientific means. This way of seeing has institutionalized itself in disciplines such as psychology, criminology, sexology, biology, anthropology, pedagogy, and many other fields; as it has done so, it has permeated and to some extent reshaped the institutional settings where those disciplines are practiced: schools, hospitals, prisons, corporations, mental institutions, and social welfare bureaus. Thus, it is not simply a grid of intelligibility, a network of knowledge; it is also a network of institutional practices, public policies, and in general the routine exercise of social and political power. It is a network of power/knowledge.

On first hearing, many readers simply reject the idea that who an individual is can be characterized and known entirely within the terms of normalization. But in fact it is extremely hard to give any information about any person at all—oneself included—without referring to sets of norms. There is hardly any intelligible way to talk about our bodies without referring to norms; how tall a person is, how fit, how healthy—virtually any as-

sertion you can make will refer to functional norms and established patterns of human physiological development and decline. Further, most of us reflect upon and present our personal histories in terms of developmental norms. We employ the language of developmental psychology to account for our behavior, our feelings, our inclinations, our talents, and our preferences in terms of developmental norms together with influences on our development that may have produced deviations from norms. In truth, most of us are quite comfortable with self-descriptions that rely upon established norms as reference points and may even feel slighted if our specific deviations go unrecognized. We know and experience ourselves as normalized selves. And this is understandable, because within the power/knowledge networks that shape our social world, the only kind of self that is intelligible at all is a normalized self. There is no outside to normalization, Foucault says, meaning that normalizing power/knowledge networks are so pervasive that beyond them nothing is knowable.

Many of Foucault's readers take these conclusions as cause for despair, for two reasons. First, if Foucault is right, our identities are all reifications of norms and/or deviations from norms and, as such, tie us to networks of power that use those norms to exploit and oppress us, as Foucault makes clear in detail. This is especially obvious with identities such as "the delinquent," "the homosexual," or "the at-risk schoolchild," but even the apparently natural category "woman" is an identity founded upon a set of developmental norms stretching from fetal sex differentiation through childhood gender acquisition through adolescent self-image formation.¹⁰ To be a woman is to have passed through numerous stages of normed development and hence to display the physical and psychic marks of that developmental process. To bear the identity "woman" is thus to be available to the institutions and disciplines that seek to direct and manage our developmental trajectories. A second reason many readers despair is that Foucault seems to be telling us that, since we are normalized selves through and through with no residual essence, to attempt to dismantle the power/knowledge networks that hold us in bondage in oppressive institutions and practices is self-defeating; dismantling normalization would amount to dismantling our own conditions of possibility. What, then, is to be done? Aren't all our avenues for taking control of our lives and resisting oppressive institutions effectively blocked? How can we possibly care for ourselves under these circumstances?

Foucault certainly does not minimize the dangers that we face. Anything we do will be risky. We cannot withdraw from a corrupt society into the apolitical security of ahistorical identities; that is an illusion, as separatist movements of the 1970s demonstrated. By the same token, we cannot simply set

our historically produced identities aside, for we *are* the developmentally emergent beings that society takes us to be. We cannot attack the very basis upon which our being is constituted and expect to be unshaken in the process. We risk ourselves, in our very being, no matter what we decide to do.

Foucault, then, speaks of ubiquitous danger. Yet his analysis does not make me feel endangered in the way that feminist woman-affirming practices do. I am much less frightened by Foucault's harsh picture of the current world than by Judy Grahn's or Kathleen Barry's optimistic exhortations to celebrate the recovery of a world and of selves we've supposedly lost. I don't recognize myself in their idyllic portrait of prehistorical womanhood, or any other portrait of womanhood for that matter. I don't feel comfortable figuring positive changes in my self-understanding and material comportment as a return to a reality obscured or lost. I can only think that positing a true or original womanhood to which we might return (to which we ought to be faithful?) will ultimately lead to (or at least play into) a defensive conservatism that fears creativity, difference, and change. Creative movements, differings, openness toward unmastered becoming will be suppressed, and those who embody and enact such movements will be oppressed within the same discourses and institutions that once held so much promise for freeing them. Within the terms of Foucault's analysis of normalization, however, I do recognize myself. I recognize myself as a self who, as "essentially" developmental, is "essentially" a phenomenon of becoming rather than of being. I recognize myself as a self who will always surpass what I have been, who will never be identical with myself from moment to moment. I recognize myself as a being who will always exceed the boundaries of any identity. If I can find ways to affirm and care for *that* self, that developmental self who "by nature" defies final categorization, I can resist the oppressive aspects of normalizing networks of power (without positing a place beyond normalization). Normalization gives us ourselves as perpetually developing. Technologies of normalization then attempt to control the direction and rate of that developmental energy. We cannot defy normalization insofar as it gives us ourselves entirely, but we can resist and gradually perhaps dismantle normalizing technologies and disciplines. We can affirm ourselves as developing beings, ever-changing beings, while at the same time adopting disciplinary practices—techniques of caring for ourselves—that affirm the movement of our own becoming at the expense of predetermined vectors and norms. In other words, we can affirm our developmental freedom without affirming the existing technologies that would harness that self-differing energy. And then perhaps perpetual self-differing will become self-overcoming and will allow something new to emerge beyond oppressive normalization.

A primary danger that Foucault sees is the almost irresistible temptation to affirm not my *self* as developmental becoming but my *identity* as some reified stage of that developmental process. The danger is that we will refuse our selves in our movements of becoming by embracing static identities. When feminists call upon me to affirm my identity as a woman, beneath this joyful affirmation of carnal and specifically sexual existence I also hear a demand that I abandon my developmental self, call a halt to becoming other, deny my potential for change and hence for self-formation, and thus abandon both the care of myself and the practice of philosophy.

What, by contrast, do I hear Foucault calling me to do? To affirm myself as a process of becoming, of becoming always other to what I have been, to find and cultivate practices that will militate against reification and thus place in question any identity's claim to timelessness. To take care of myself, in Foucauldian terms, is to foster an awareness of becoming, of otherness, to hold myself open to an open future, to give myself over to what is not and cannot yet be known.¹¹ This, for a developmental self, is self-affirmation; it requires the perpetual overcoming of identificatory categories. Care of the self, therefore, stands opposed to practices that affirm my identity as a woman. Practices of woman-affirmation stand opposed to affirmation of the free play of becoming, differing, and otherness.

This brings me, rather abruptly, into the full scope of the terrible tension I feel when I try to situate myself in relation to my philosophical work and my feminist work simultaneously. If philosophy is a lifelong activity of self-formation, which implies that the self is not a static entity awaiting recovery, can I be both a philosopher and a feminist?

I don't know. I want to say yes, because I know the creative power of the feminist practices that over the last twenty-five years produced *me*. But in all honesty, I'm not sure. That the way to an answer involves resolute living through the tension, though, I have no doubt. It is through attempts at philosophical, ethical *practice* of feminism that an answer will constitute itself for each of us.

This much is clear to me: If I am to continue to be a feminist, I have to find ways to rethink, but even more importantly to re-create, materially and bodily, both the concept and the experience of womanhood. One way to do that might be to learn to think woman not as a category of human being, not as an identity, but as the name for a locus of creative formation.¹² This would require first of all engagement in practices that would destabilize the category. If this were his project, Foucault would engage in genealogical scholarship, which is also an option for me. Reading (and teaching) the works of scholars who have produced partial genealogies of certain aspects of womanhood would surely be helpful—works like Elizabeth Badinter's

Mother Love and Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* come to mind. I might also focus my attention on womanhood as a visual phenomenon and try to destabilize categorical thinking by challenging visual expectations. I can place myself in situations where my visual images of womanhood are disrupted. These can be queer places—like bars that cater to mixed sex and transgender groups—or they can be all-female places—like gym locker rooms. In the former kind of place, obviously, it's hard to tell who is female (whatever that starts out meaning) and who is not, and after awhile I find I get numbed to the question and just put it aside. In the latter kind of place, femaleness ceases to be a distinguishing feature of anybody, so the huge variety of what gets called female embodiment and comportment comes into full view.¹³ Maybe if the category woman is sufficiently destabilized and de-centered, I could start working on ways to think woman as something other than a category, something more like a site of volatility. Affirmations of womanhood could then become not affirmations of a static presence or truth but rather affirmations of something precisely not fully present and not fully envisioned.¹⁴

I have to acknowledge that for all its postmodern rhetorical correctness, I'm a little wary of this path—not the practices of category destabilization, which I engage in regularly, but the redefinition of womanhood beyond categorization.¹⁵ Although I believe such a thing is logically possible and even over time almost inevitable, such “solutions” offered hastily never sound like much more than some kind of verbal trick—like I could rectify all sorts of sexual injustices by just defining women as we know them/us out of existence. If women didn't exist, all kinds of important political issues (abortion, job discrimination, rape) wouldn't exist either. But those issues do exist, and no mere verbal contortion is going to set them aside. Although I see the philosophical value of this approach and I know its goal is the very opposite of the kind of loss I fear, I still worry that without a lot of careful work it could reduce my feminist practice to some kind of esoteric exercise in theory production, to something that won't have much impact on most people's lives, including my own. And what's the point of that? After all, if feminism is important at all, it is because it is first of all about securing justice, recognition, protection, and material well-being for people who currently fit rather static definitions of femaleness taken as a natural kind.¹⁶ To do nothing more than just redefine feminism so as to leave out that kind of tough work is to skirt the most important issues. So one important question I have to ask is: Is it possible to engage in that more traditional kind of feminist political practice (the nitty-gritty equal rights and equal protections kind) while embracing a de-categorized conception of woman as a locus of becoming?

Although such engagement would require reorientation in our political thinking and extensive reworking of our liberal rhetoric, I believe it is possible. I think I can embrace the idea that “woman” (whatever else it may be) is the name for an important site for the emergence of a future and argue effectively that those whose lives unfold at such sites must be protected, physically and legally, and their free becoming fostered. What is important is not the preservation of whatever “woman” *is*,¹⁷ but the openness to the becoming that occurs as what woman is overcomes itself and surpasses itself toward an open future. I think political action could be grounded in something no more doctrinal and definite than that. I think I could do significant political work on the strength of a belief in the importance of resisting governmental, legal, economic, and cultural foreclosure of creative possibility. That path might be a very hard one to negotiate, but that is no reason to avoid taking it.

Furthermore, some of the resources for developing such political strategies already exist in some of the feminist practices I’ve already encountered and cultivated for many years. When I (along with so many other feminists in the 1980s) was rethinking female bodies, was I not by so doing actually creating a new body for myself, a body that I now inhabit and enact? I think so, even if I and the feminists around me did not always recognize or acknowledge the creative dimensions of what we were doing. And when we challenged masculine supremacy and authority, did we do so always in the name of some older truth that had a prior claim? I don’t think so; I think we often did so in the name of difference and futurity rather than in the language of return. Sometimes we made assertions; we made truth-claims, and truth-claims almost always at least implicitly ally themselves with timelessness, sameness, a present that does not change. But no matter what assertions we might have made, insofar as our feminism was embodied in practices rather than in doctrines and propositions, it allied itself with history, contingency, and difference. Even Judy Grahn’s practices affirm difference and change, despite the fact that the conclusions she draws from them deny contingency. We, I, need to acknowledge that implicit alliance between history, difference, and practice and make it explicit in all our political acts.

Still, it remains to be seen whether the work we would undertake once these transformations had occurred would constitute something we would want to call “feminist.” That work would certainly have feminism in its lineage; it would certainly have been conditioned by a feminist past. But would it be feminist? If we truly do embrace the future as open and ourselves as women as historical existences, I don’t think that question is answerable in advance.

To conclude: I’ve said here that I believe, with Foucault, that philosophy

is not a body of doctrine or even a set of analytical techniques. It is a way of living, a pursuit that informs all our activities and is informed by all our activities. It has been called pursuit of wisdom—which means that it is a kind of creative self-shaping, a kind of self-transformation that opens toward differing, toward the unmastered and the unknown. We normalized selves, fundamentally developmental and therefore perpetually transformative “in essence,” are particularly well suited to take up philosophy and even to do so both as a means of resisting oppressive normalizing technologies and as a means of caring for and affirming ourselves. Construed in this way, as Foucauldian care of the self, can philosophy be feminist? Can feminism be philosophical? I hope so. But, in the end, whether feminism can be philosophical or philosophy can be feminist are not issues that can ever be settled on paper. They can be resolved only in practice, by being enacted and incorporated. Therefore I must leave the question open here. It stands as a challenge to me and to all feminists and philosophers to make it so. That is, to live it so.

NOTES

1. See, for example, the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* where Foucault writes, “I have benefited greatly from the works of Peter Brown and those of Pierre Hadot, and I have been helped more than once by the conversations we have had and the views they have expressed” (1985, 8).

2. Hadot was Foucault’s colleague for one year at the College de France, having taken the chair in the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought in 1983.

3. This is a temptation that a lot of good thinkers succumb to; they write an extremely influential book or set of articles, and then they spend the rest of their lives repackaging the same ideas in better and better ways. Not that there isn’t value in doing that, but it is primarily a literary, not a philosophical, activity.

4. See Embree (1970, 194–212) and Weisstein (1970, 228–45).

5. Echols (1989, 5). Echols maintains that there is a distinction of note between radical feminism and cultural feminism, even though some of the same thinkers are prominent in both. I’m less sure of her distinction, but whether it is conceptually sound or not, the point remains that the work of the 1960s and early 1970s has a different thrust or at least is open to a different interpretation than the work that came after it.

6. Beauvoir quotes several women’s descriptions of their own extremely negative attitudes toward menstruation (1989, 310–14).

7. See, for example, Barry: “We must look to our matriarchal past for guidance in defining a culture that is a logical extension of nature. With the essence of motherhood and a sense of the preservation of life imprinted in our genes, matrilineal descent will naturally become the organization of the society we envision” (1973, 25). See also, for example, Daly (1984).

8. Foucault (1980, 117): "I don't believe the problem can be solved by historicising the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of object etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history."

9. See, for example, Foucault's claim: "My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1983, 208).

10. I have an unpublished paper on this subject entitled "Of or Pertaining to a Female," which I presented as a keynote address at Vanderbilt University's Philosophy and Feminism conference in January 1999.

11. For a great deal more detail about this notion of a self-overcoming selfhood, see McWhorter (1999, especially chapter 7).

12. Much as we might think of the space formed by the interplay of Dionysus and Apollo in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

13. This doesn't work in same-sex spaces where people are particularly insistent upon a single image of their sex—like traditional baby showers or gyms where everyone is young and beautiful. The gym at my university is a good place to go because there are beautiful, slim, young women but also, since any employee can use the facility for free, there are older women with weight problems, women with injuries and disabilities, bull dykes with big muscles, and of course a number of anorexics. To categorize all these bodies and comportments as one type of human being, a type that overrides all other differences, seems ridiculous in that context. The more time I spend in that context, the less overriding the category "woman" comes to seem. I think Honi Haber is suggesting something like this tactic. See Haber (1996, 137–56).

14. I take this path to be the one advocated by Judith Butler: "Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary. This is not to say that the term 'woman' ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that 'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. . . . To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (1992, 15–16).

15. As Foucault says, everything is dangerous, and postmodernism is no exception.

16. Even the personal changes I've described above required social and legal

change. It really wasn't enough for me to rethink my female embodiedness. Laws had to change to allow women to engage in activities previously unavailable or off-limits to us. Attitudes of people around me had to change to accommodate my changes. There were communal forces at work in my feminist self-transformations, and those must not be overlooked or minimized.

17. It is important, though, to acknowledge and contend with the various things that woman *is*, to work through them and possibly at times to redeploy them strategically. We can't ignore the category. It does exist and have a very real place and impact.

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